

Turkish Independent Cinema: Between Bourgeois Auterism and Political Radicalism

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This chapter provides an overview and analysis of the key periods, directors, feature films, and aesthetic styles in Turkish independent cinema. Without financial backing and with little public interest and an authoritarian censorship board – curtailing individualistic and political forms of expression – Turkish independent cinema developed, against all odds, in the 1960s. Since that time independent film-making has evolved as a result of different movements led by urban and well-educated directors. Yet, many of these cinematic movements never made it past their fringe existence, because Turkey's mainstream film industry has always relied on the commercial and entertainment aspects of film production. Consequently, these movements played a minor role in the country's overall cinema history; nevertheless, their influence and importance with respect to inspiring new generations of filmmakers continues to this day.

Introduction

As in many countries across Europe, audiences in Turkey saw the screenings of Lumière and Pathé shorts in 1896. During that period, film crews also documented city life in Istanbul and exhibited these films in major European centres (Scognamillo 2003). For their first dramatic features, in the 1920s, Turkish filmmakers adopted the Hollywood model of using genre films and star vehicles to entice the public's interest (Arslan 2011). It would be decades before Turkish film directors developed their own style and focused on the more personal, political, and aesthetic aspects. One of the key reasons that independent film-making would not proliferate until the 1960s was the lack of support

by Yeşilçam – as Turkey’s film industry is known – of local film movements. In addition, the political establishment tended to ban or censor the social ideals and opposing political convictions reflected in independent films.

Aesthetically, Turkey’s independent filmmakers followed the style of Europe’s art-house cinema. Their works reflected an anti-Hollywood stance and, to a certain degree, envy of a prosperous European way of life. The results were films that focused on personal introspection and a critical take on life as seen through the lens of a Western-educated intellectual and filmmaker. As international funding became available in the 1980s, Turkish filmmakers began to showcase their works on the international film festival circuit as well.

An increasing focus on political themes brought filmmakers into conflict with the censorship board. As early as 1919, Turkey’s review board and censors had banned films in the name of decency. Ahmet Fehim’s *Mürebbiye / The Tudor* (1919) was banned because it insulted the French occupying forces in Istanbul after the First World War (Scognamiglio 2003). In the following years other films were censored by local police forces, but Metin Erksan’s *Karanlık Dünya / Dark World* (1952) was the first to be banned for political reasons. Other independent films were banned over the next two decades. The most infamous ban occurred in the 1980s and involved the destruction of all of Yılmaz Güney’s films. When film censorship was finally lifted in 1992, the doors were opened for indie directors to address sensitive political themes in films like *Sonbahar / Autumn* (directed by Özcan Alper, 2008), *Bahoz / The Storm* (Kazım Öz, 2008) and *Press* (Sedat Yılmaz, 2010).

The early independents of the 1960s (such as Halit Refiğ and Erksan) were in favour of a social realist and national cinema, but their efforts were met with little interest from audiences and the general public. Consequently they returned to mainstream cinema. During the 1970s directors who were trained in France, like Ali Zeki Heper, made some films, as did a few documentary producers focusing on short films. Yet this era of relative political freedom for filmmakers was short lived. A brutal military coup crushed dissidents in 1980; independent filmmakers with an opposing political stance were sent to prison or into exile, their films were banned, and in some cases all their film negatives were destroyed.

In the post-1980s era indie films were created by several new directors, such as Ömer Kavur, Ali Özgentürk, and Yusuf Kurçenli. Unfortunately their films held little appeal for larger audiences. Nevertheless,

they were the first to receive foreign funding and recognition at international festivals. A decade later, Turkey's commercial cinema lost its place to television and Hollywood film imports. At the same time new filmmakers – like Yeni Sinemacılar, Serdar Akar, Kudret Sabancı, and Önder Çakar – emerged, gathering a cult following for their directorial style of depicting harsh urban realities. Soon these directors were absorbed into what was left of Turkey's commercial film and television industries.

As described by other authors in this volume – Lydia Papadimitriou with respect to Greece, and Sheila Petty with regard to film production in Africa – increased access to digital cameras and editing equipment provided a boost for independent filmmakers in Turkey as well. In the 2000s directors like Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Semih Kaplanoğlu, Zeki Demirkubuz, and Derviş Zaim offered intimate portraits of life in the city (especially of urban alienation) and created a unique cinema for the modern age. Their films gained recognition at European film festivals, as illustrated by Nuri Bilge Ceylan who won awards at Cannes for every one of his films. Their success provided the basis for a New Cinema Movement (with directors like Yeni Sinema Hareketi), which probably constitutes the best-organized group of independent filmmakers in Turkey. They collaborate on films and assist each other in obtaining development or project funding, consequently achieving international acclaim from critics and scholars alike. Today they even operate their own film theatre (Feriye Sineması) where they regularly gather for panel discussions and screen their favourite films.

In spite of aesthetic and stylistic differences, Turkey's independent cinema movements share many elements with other independent cinemas of the world. From an aesthetic point of view, Turkish independent cinema shares various qualities with American independent cinema; for example, working within a commercial system, but stepping out in order to create new styles and content, is common to both. As for differences between Turkish and Hollywood films, Turkish crews, from directors, actors, and technical crews, are trained on the job rather than obtaining their professional credentials at a film school. Funding is mostly based on private or "personal" investments, especially by producers. Sometimes exhibition chains pre-buy film rights as well.

From a stylistic point of view, Turkish filmmakers aspire to what Erdogan (1998) refers to as a two-dimensionality of the frame rather than the creation of a three-dimensional perspective. Also, films are shot using non-synchronous audio systems and are dubbed later

(Erdogan 2002). Although Turkey's film industry has its own stars and genres, its fast and cheap approach to productions targets the domestic market, which is in direct competition with Hollywood (Akser 2013).

Turkey's independent filmmakers progressively acquired know-how with respect to the funding mechanism and distribution channels for their films. They learned to cope with a stringent censorship board by avoiding explicit political themes in their films and choosing to portray personal angles instead. Yet each movement operated from its own set of ideas and values. They were, and still are, recognized and celebrated by international film festival communities, while their home-grown audiences remain mostly unaware of their existence and their importance.

Declarations of Independence in Turkish Cinema

Independent cinema can be interpreted in many ways, as highlighted in Yannis Tzioumakis's definitions of *independent*, *indie*, *indiewood* or Martin Mhando's notion of African independent filmmaking and its complex reactions to Hollywood, globalization, and modernity. Yet there also exist commonalities in the way critics and audiences receive these films. Independent films often win awards at film festivals for their unique representation and interpretation of human existence. At the same time they tend to appeal to niche audiences only and therefore can be box-office failures. In other words, independent films tend to gain prestige but not necessarily widespread popularity. According to Chris Holmlund (Holmlund and Wyatt 2005, 2), independent films suggest "social engagement and/or aesthetic experimentation – a distinctive visual look, an unusual narrative pattern, a self-reflexive style." Indie films are characterized by the personal and indelible imprints that directors impart on narrative, focuses, style, and aesthetics during production. From a broader perspective, auteur films and avant-garde works, as well as identity-based and socially conscious films, all fall under the umbrella of independent cinema. They also tend to reflect the filmmakers unique take on life, human existence, and the status quo. As Emanuel Levy (1999, 2) points out, "ideally, an indie is a fresh, low-budget movie with a gritty style and offbeat subject matter that express the filmmaker's personal vision." It is also a mode of production, as Yannis Tzioumakis (2006, 1) notes: "independent filmmaking consists of low-budget projects made by (mostly) young filmmakers with a strong personal vision away from influence and pressures from the few major conglomerates." Turkish independent cinema is characterized

by groups of artists who temporarily coalesce around similar values and ideas that culminate in a “manifesto” about their vision for independent film. These movements form, create a variety of unique works, achieve international acclaim and success with niche audiences at film festivals, and then disperse.

Throughout its history and across its various movements Turkish independent cinema has been an alternative to the country’s commercial film industry, the Yeşilçam. Especially in the 1960s, it presented a counterpoint to the national-populist entertainment cinema. With an increase in the number of films produced during that time, the stage was set for the first independent filmmakers to arrive on the scene. Many of these filmmakers were well educated and shared an urban background. Their works focused on the alienation of modern life, class differences, gender issues, and ethnic conflict. They openly expressed political viewpoints in spite of state censorship. In most cases, their films were government funded (or sourced from international funding streams), not for profit, and only enjoyed a limited theatrical run. Overall, production was small scale with no guarantees of distribution.

In the early days of the 1960s, independent-film financing relied on voluntary contributions from cast and crew. At times, producers like Hürrem Erman and Türker İnanoğlu set up special deals with successful directors (for example, Metin Erksan and Halit Refiğ) who agreed to direct a more commercially oriented film in exchange for an independent film the following year. Crews were also compensated accordingly. This practice was popular until the 1990s when indie directors could access grants issued by the Ministry of Culture or by pan-European initiatives like Eurimages (for a detailed discussion about Eurimages, see Teresa Hoefert de Turégano’s chapter, “European Union Initiatives for Independent Filmmakers across Europe,” in this volume). Some directors set up their own production companies that focused on commercial films such as Memduh Ün’s Uğur Film and Ömer Kavur’s Alfa Film, in addition to independent productions. However, overall, Turkish indie directors tended to be more interested in developing a unique style that would set them apart from their contemporaries than in accumulating profits at the box office.

Auteurs and Independents of the 1960s

In the 1960s a group of young intellectuals formed a group that envisioned a “cinema for the people” (Refiğ 2009).¹ It would portray “real”

people and their everyday problems, underscored by a new aesthetic and formal experimentation that had not been seen in mainstream cinema before. The group was active from 1961 until its peak in 1965, when it became a predominantly social-realist movement, refocused on national cinema production, and then disappeared in 1969. The young directors followed the lead of Kemal Tahir, a leftist author and intellectual known for his socialist interpretation of Turkish history. He inspired the group's films with an anti-capitalist stance, portrayals of alienation in modern society, and the loss of human values. A "cinema for the people" also necessitated films that depicted common social or political incidents, such as a strike, civil disobedience, or rural migration to the big city. Members like Halit Refiğ, Metin Erksan, Memduh Ün, Lütfü Akad, Duygu Sağıroğlu, and Ertem Göreç organized meetings in each other's homes as early as 1959 to discuss the direction they envisioned for Turkish cinema. The turning point for the group came when one of them, Metin Erksan, suddenly won the coveted Berlin Golden Bear Prize in 1962 with *Susuz Yaz / Dry Summer* (1963). Some of their most memorable films include Metin Erksan's *Gecelerin Ötesi / Beyond the Nights* (1960), *Yılanların Öcü / Wrath of the Snakes* (1962), and *Suçlular Aramızda / Criminals Are Among Us* (1964); and Duygu Sağıroğlu's *Bitmeyen Yol / Never-Ending Road* (1965) (Refiğ 2003).²

After 1965 and the general election, which resulted in the right-wing Justice Party taking power, Turkey's filmmakers turned increasingly to commercial film production. The National Cinema Movement, which superseded the previous group of indie filmmakers, was linked to the release of two influential films by Metin Erksan, *Sevmek Zamanı / Time to Love* (1965) and *Kuyu / The Well* (1967). The films received neither critical acclaim nor widespread interest from audiences. In addition, distributors refused to distribute *Time to Love*, which was shot and financed entirely by its director. Nonetheless, the film remains a masterpiece of Turkey's cinema owing to its contemplative treatment of fundamental questions: What is the meaning of love? And what is the nature of reality versus illusions? It is reminiscent of the works of Antonioni and Visconti, two directors that Erksan greatly admired. One can sum up the National Cinema Movement as a group of filmmakers who aimed for a unique aesthetic in their films, in particular with regard to embracing Turkey's dramatic arts and traditions. It was a cinema about Turkey's people and the stark contrasts they experience in their daily lives. Thus, it departed from the ideas and aesthetics found in other European films of that time.

Figure 8.1 The arrival of the rural family to Istanbul in Halit Refiğ's *Birds of Exile / Gurbet Kuşları* (1965). Migration was a major issue for the independents of the 1960s. Image courtesy of Gülper Refiğ.



Figure 8.2 A man in love with the image of a woman, which was hard for the audience of the 1960s to understand. Metin Erksan's *Time to Love / Sevmek Zamanı* (1965). Image courtesy of Metin Erksan.



An Anomaly: Alp Zeki Heper

One of the most visually original and truly independent Turkish directors was Alp Zeki Heper. Born in 1939, Heper attended film school in France and made experimental shorts that were comparable to Roman Polanski's works from the 1950s. Heper financed most of his films himself, all of which were censored by the authorities. His feature film *Love Stories of the Pale Night / Soluk Gecenin Aşk Hikayeleri* (1966) was banned by the Turkish Film Commission and later the Turkish Supreme Court. It is still unavailable even today. His two short films, *Le parfum de la dame en noir* (1962) and *Dawn* (1963), became accessible online (Vimeo and YouTube) in 2011. These shorts reveal Heper's surrealist tendencies in the tradition of Luis Buñuel. He chose psychoanalytic elements and sexually explicit materials for his films, which conservative audiences found difficult to tolerate. Yet Heper was outside any political

movement and pursued arts like poetry and painting away from the spotlight. Frustrated by a society and government that curtailed his sense of creative freedom, Heper gathered all of his creative works and burned them in front of his apartment in 1975. In many ways Heper's career is a tragic example of how a Western-educated, independent Turkish filmmaker with a European aesthetic never received the proper support from Turkey's mainstream industry and, in addition, suffered extensive negative press that led to the ban of his films (Scognamiglio 2003). Heper died of cancer in 1984. In his will he forbade his family from ever screening any of his films in public.³

The 1970s Manifesto of a Group of Young Rebels

When Turkey's National Cinema Movement came to an end, several young directors found new inspiration in Paris's uprisings of May 1968. The Young Filmmakers Group (Genç Sinema Topluluğu) screened their short films at the Hisar Film Festival in Istanbul, the first of its kind to embrace and screen shorts. They were not afraid to take a political stance; in their view, cinema needed to be political and deal with social issues. They protested against Shell Oil Company and the exclusion of Ali Tara's anti-American short film from the Hisar Film Festival (Gevgilili 1989). In their view, cinema was more than entertainment; it represented culture. Therefore, to work as a filmmaker meant to aim for creating a better world, including workers' rights (Paneli 2005). Members of the Young Filmmakers Group such as Artun Yeres, Ahmet Soner, and Veysel Atayman went on to become successful documentary filmmakers and eventually established Turkey's Documentary Filmmakers Association.

Yılmaz Güney's Political Independence

Yılmaz Güney was active in Turkish commercial cinema as an actor, screenwriter, and assistant director before he became an independent filmmaker. Between 1963 and 1972 Güney played the lead role in adventure thrillers, portraying the rugged, crime-fighting, dark hero. In an interview he referred to himself as the "ugly king," a nickname that stuck with producers and audiences alike (Akser 2009). Gradually Güney turned to directing films, where he expressed his socialist convictions, especially with regard to the exploitation of labour. He wrote, directed, acted, and funded his films, which were mostly critical portrayals of

Figure 8.3 The stark reality of the poverty of the people in Yılmaz Güney's *Hope/Umut* (1970). Image courtesy of Fatoş Güney.



Turkey's ruthless capitalist society. Some of his films include *Seyyit Han* (1968), *Hungry Wolves / Aç Kurtlar* (1969), *Hope/Umut* (1970), *Pain/Acı* (1971), *Comrade/Arkadaş* (1974), *The Poor Ones / Zavallılar* (1974), and *The Herd / Sürü* (1978).

In *Hope*, Güney follows the lives of three treasure hunters in contemporary Turkey. His realistic portrayal of characters and their living conditions was celebrated by film critics as a masterful example of independent cinema. As others before him, Güney eventually came in conflict with the state's censorship board because his films depicted class and ethnic differences and Kurdish culture. He was also imprisoned for accidentally killing a judge during a brawl. Güney directed his last films from prison by proxy. Eventually he escaped from prison, took refuge in France, and completed the last two films, *The Way / Yol* (1982) and *The Wall / Duvar* (1984). Güney won numerous awards at European film festivals.

His political convictions and independent stance inspired future generations of Turkish filmmakers, especially his two assistants, Şerif Gören and Zeki Ökten, who continued on his artistic path until the mid-1980s.

The Elite Independence of the 1980s

In 1982 Yılmaz Güney was awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for his film *Yol*. Even though *Yol* was banned from being exhibited in Turkey until the 1990s, it opened the way for other independent filmmakers in Turkey. Europe had taken notice, but, since it was dangerous to make openly political films, Turkish filmmakers channelled the political through the personal in the form of stories and character portrayals. They were inspired by the aesthetic and narrative conventions of French cinema and auteurs like Visconti, Antonioni, and Bergman. They emulated the use of long takes to depict urban alienation and the psychological complexity of their characters.

The most notable among these directors was Ömer Kavur. He received his training at a French film school and consequently worked in France with Alain Robbe-Grillet. Kavur revolutionized Turkish indie filmmaking by starting his own production company, securing international film funding, attending film festivals worldwide, and having an uncompromising aesthetic that defied box-office demands. He inspired other filmmakers like Erden Kıral, Yavuz Özkan, Zülfü Livaneli, Ali Özgentürk, and Yusuf Kurçenli to follow his artistic path. Their films focused on personal stories, alienation, and loss of traditions. Like Kavur, they sought international funding for their films, followed the global festival circuit, and showed little concern with respect to their film's profitability or impact on Turkish audiences.

The New Filmmakers Movement (Yeni Sinemacılar), 1997

Film production in Turkey declined dramatically between 1990 and 1996. Yet, strangely enough, a new idealism could be felt among those who still made independent works. Similar to the earlier indie movement, filmmakers organized in a cooperative that shared joint authorship of the works they produced. The New Filmmakers included directors like Serdar Akar, Önder Çakar, and Kudret Sabancı, all of whom had received formal training in film schools. The first film associated with this movement was the critically acclaimed *On Board / Gemide* (1998), with a screenplay written by Serdar Akar. Set on a merchant ship, it

portrayed the harsh realities of working-class life. *On Board* was followed by the sequel *A Saint in Laleli / Laleli'de Bir Azize* (1998), which focused on a similar storyline (the kidnapping and rape of a young girl) but presented it from a different point of view.

Serdar Akar wrote the script for *Off-Site / Dar Alanda Kısa Paslaşmalar* (2001) and *Maruf* (2001). He made his directorial debut in 2006 with *A Man's Fear of God / Takva* (2006), a film about the inner workings of a religious sect. This was followed by *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* (2005) and the debut of Akar, together with his friend Kudret Sabancı, as a director for television. Akar became one of the most financially successful directors of his time.

The New Filmmakers Movement flourished with the end of state censorship in 1992 and the emergence of new funding streams for independent directors (for example, Eurimages). Turkey's filmmakers also began to use co-production as a means to develop new films with partners in Europe. Between 1991 and 2002 Turkey's social-democratic Ministry of Culture created a climate for innovative and progressive films with edgy and politically charged topics. Even today, under the more right-wing conservative Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) government, filmmakers continue to tackle socially and politically challenging themes, which have won awards at many European film festivals.

The Festival Auteurs of the 2000s

Turkey's decline in commercial film production between 1990 and 1996 provided an opportunity for independent filmmakers to flourish. The Festival Auteurs released their first features between 1993 and 1994 but only rose to international prominence in the 2000s. They included indie directors like Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Zeki Demirkubuz, Semih Kaplanoğlu, Derviş Zaim, Reha Erdem, and Yeşim Ustaoglu, also known in the scholarly literature as the founding fathers of the New Turkish Cinema (for example, Atam 2011; Suner 2010; Dönmez-Colin 2008; Arslan 2009). They successfully accessed international development funding and the international film festival circuit. Like their counterparts in other countries, they were celebrated abroad; yet only select audiences, numbering a few thousand, viewed their films at home. Nonetheless, they were respected as artists and for their own non-traditional visual style.

In the 2000s Turkey's commercial cinema and film production recovered, aided greatly by locally controlled theatre chains in support of Turkish film. Beginning in 1997, audiences also began to show a growing

Figure 8.4 The lonely individuals of the 2000s indie directors in Zeki Demirkubuz's *Underground/Yeraltı* (2012). Image courtesy of Zeki Demirkubuz.



interest in blockbuster films as well as Turkish mainstream productions. Both the television and the advertising industries were responsible for this growth as they encouraged young professionals to enter the field. Art-house-film audiences also increased during this period,⁴ and the Turkish media commented favourably on new independent production (Akser 2010). Indeed, SİYAD, the Turkish Association of Film Critics, has presented an award for best director at every film festival since 2000.

The Festival Auteurs of the 2000s developed and honed their unique style for over a decade. They preferred themes that portrayed the past through a lens of nostalgia, such as small-town life and the yearning for a lost childhood. They found inspiration in the works of Dostoevsky and Andrei Tarkovsky. They were independent from Turkey's commercial film industry Yeşilçam and showed no interest in the blockbuster boom of the late 1990s. Yet they benefited from the theatre proprietors' fostering of Turkey's film talent and consequently found a welcoming exhibition space for their films. Noteworthy examples of the movement's films include *Somersault in a Coffin / Tabutta Rövaşata* (Derviş Zaim, 1996), *Innocence/Masumiyet* (Zeki Demirkubuz, 1997), *Journey to the Sun / Güneşe Yolculuk* (Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 1999), *Distant/Uzak* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2002), *Times and Winds / Beş Vakit* (Reha Erdem, 2006), and *Honey/Bal* (Semih Kaplanoğlu, 2010).

Figure 8.5 A man alone. Ahmet Uluçay reinvented the way in which one man, by himself, can make film. Image courtesy of Ezel Akay.



Ahmet Uluçay: Standing All Alone

Ahmet Uluçay is unequivocally the most impressive of all independent filmmakers in Turkish cinema. His humble origins in a village in mid-Anatolia never posed a hurdle to his forging a career that began with underground films in the 1990s and led to critical success with feature films such as *Boats out of Watermelon Rinds / Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak* (2004). With no formal education or training, Uluçay mastered the art of filmmaking by meeting members of a travelling cinema show to his village and by building his own camera. His style and vision were unique in Turkish film. Uluçay died from a brain tumour in 2009. His films remain as expressions of the most distinctively independent filmmaking practices in Turkish cinema.

New Cinema Movement (Yeni Sinema Hareketi), 2007

Turkey's independent film movements tend to reinvent themselves decade after decade. The more organized of these movements acquire

a designated theatre and multi-purpose space for exhibiting their films. They share this space with production companies, film festivals, and industry training workshops. The latest group of filmmakers coalescing around the New Cinema Movement made their initial mark with the following films: Özcan Alper's *Autumn/Sonbahar* (2008), Seyfi Teoman's *Summer Book / Tatil Kitabı* (2008), and Hüseyin Karabey's *My Marlon and Brando / Gitmek* (2008).

In 2008 Alper, Teoman, and Karabey formed a union in support of first-time film directors. The following year, Seren Yüce's film *Majority/Çoğunluk* (2010) firmly established the reputation of Turkey's new independent film movement when Yüce received the Lion of the Future award at the Venice Film Festival. Unlike previous movements, members of the New Cinema Movement never disbanded but continue to collaborate on film. Their common themes and styles are exemplified in two masterpieces, the films *Majority* and *Autumn*.

Majority tells the story of a typical middle-class Turkish family living in Istanbul. The father, a patriarch and a building contractor, embodies the country's unbridled capitalism; the mother silently preserves the domestic order. But their son is a lost, clueless teenager who has given up on his dreams. He and his Kurdish girlfriend are unlikely to fulfil their parents' expectations of settling into a stable home life in the near future.

The film reveals its alliance to the New Cinema Movement right from the start when the movement's official logo is displayed as part of the opening credits. Erkan Can (the captain from *On Board*), a member of the previous indie movement, assumes a brief role as a taxi driver, thus showing a connection between the New Filmmakers Movement and the New Cinema Movement.

Majority also focuses on the post-2000 "shopping mall generation" who are clueless of the ideological and political frameworks underpinning their lives. Mertkan, the son, is raised to become a typical consumer, someone who follows an impulse to satisfy his material needs. He eats at fast-food restaurants, hangs out with his friends, and shows off an expensive new car. His relationships with women are insincere as he exploits them mostly for sex. As such, the film is a powerful critique of capitalist consumer society, legitimized by law and state, as well as the patriarchal, nuclear family. Race is also an important issue in *Majority*. Mertkan's father hates his girlfriend, Gül, because she is of Kurdish descent.

Another quintessential film of the New Cinema Movement is Özcan Alper's *Autumn/Sonbahar* (2008). *Autumn* is the story of the final days of

Yusuf, a political prisoner, who has just been released from prison for health reasons. He returns to his hometown, Artvin, a city bordering on Georgia. Yusuf is greeted by his only living relative, his elderly mother. He goes downtown and meets Eka, a young Georgian prostitute. Eka is moved by his story: Yusuf has lost his father and his love while in prison. He tries to talk Eka into going to Batumi with him. However, Eka leaves him before he can arrange a trip to Georgia for both of them.

Like *Majority*, *Autumn* reflects a loss of idealism and the isolation felt by members of a minority group living amidst a different ethnic community. Ethnic, social, class, and gender differences therefore lie at the core of the film. Alper accentuates this sense of loss, alienation, and the internal conflict of a man at the end of his life, by choosing the gloomy northeastern Black Sea region of Turkey as a backdrop. Yusuf and his family speak Hemsin, a version of Armenian. The Armenians have long left Turkey, during and after the First World War. There is only a small population left in Hemsin, unnoticed by the rest of the world.

Alper chose to depict Yusuf's alienation through the metaphors of nature. His lens captured a landscape that was equally isolated and alienating. It framed the lost battle of an aspiring society, the languished ideals of socialist reform, and personal sacrifices. In *Autumn*, Yusuf's existence continues to resemble that of a prisoner; his home feels like a jail cell, cut off from the outside where there is life, vegetation, and people. Yusuf is mostly shown from behind, which emphasizes his loneliness and loss. Alper contrasted the psychological stagnation of his main character by juxtaposing images of isolation and distance, achieved through a vast landscape, from the deep blue sky and sea to snow-capped mountain ranges to the endless horizon. In one scene Yusuf stands on a pier and stares at the sea. His inner conflicts are echoed by the giant waves crashing against the shore, as if they could wash away all his sorrows.

The founding directors of the New Cinema Movement remain active filmmakers to this day. Özcan Alper made *Future Lasts Forever / Gelecek Uzun Sürer* (2011), and Pelin Esmer directed *Watchtower / Gözetleme Kulesi* (2012). One of the group's members, Seyfi Teoman, passed away in 2012; he leaves behind a legacy of award-winning films like *Our Grand Despair / Bizim Büyük Çaresizliğimiz* (2011), which was nominated for the Berlin Golden Bear Award in 2011. New filmmakers like Tolga Karaçelik (*Toll Booth / Gişe Memuru*, 2010) and Tayfur Aydın (*Trace / İz-Reç*, 2011) have joined the movement. With films that highlight the alienation of modern life and personal loss, the New Cinema

Figure 8.6 The dying revolutionary experiences loss in its depth in Özcan Alper's *Autumn/Sonbahar* (2008). Image courtesy of Özcan Alper.



Movement continues to shine at international festivals. Films like *Beyond the Hill / Tepenin Ardı* and *Mold/Kiif* (2012) count as their most recent achievements.

Conclusion

Independent filmmakers in Turkey have had to face many challenges, from lack of funding to censorship and persecution. Eventually their unique oeuvre and contribution to the cultural life of the country was recognized. In spite of influences from their European counterparts, they followed a unique vision of Turkey's independent cinema. The directors came mostly from elite and urban backgrounds. They included theorists like Halit Refiğ, great stylists like Metin Erksan, and odd mavericks like Alp Zeki Heper, who dared to take on the establishment but tragically lost. In every decade new and talented directors emerged who labelled their movement as ground-breaking and unique; yet each of Turkey's independent film movements has dealt with similar themes. Even today,

filmmakers like Ahmet Uluçay set out to shoot feature films in remote villages with minimal input from collaborators and all by themselves. At the same time, many indie filmmakers embrace the growing internationalization of the film community. They show their films at festivals and enjoy the devotion of their niche audiences. While some filmmakers like horror director Tan Tolga Demirci (*Gomeda*, 2007) are ignored by critics, Turkish independent filmmaking continues to thrive and will most likely leave its indelible mark on cinema history.

NOTES

- 1 *Halk Sineması* in Turkish.
- 2 Additional titles include Halit Refiğ's *Şehirdeki Yabancı* / *Stranger in the City* (1963), *Gurbet Kuşları* / *Birds of Exile* (1964), and *Haremde Dört Kadın* / *Four Women in the Harem* (1964); Ertem Göreç's *Otobüs Yolcuları* / *Bus Riders* (1961), and *Karanlıkta Uyananlar* / *Awaking in the Dark* (1965).
- 3 A similar victim of independence was Atilla Tokatlı, another Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (IDHEC) graduate who made *The Street That Led to the Sea* / *Denize İnen Sokak* in 1960. The film was shown at the Karlovy-Vary, Locarno, and Venice film festivals and won the best film award in İzmir Film Festival. Tokatlı produced his second feature in 1964 and then left filmmaking forever. Both directors were interested in the psychology of the alienated individual and the surreal-abstract esthetics of European cinema (Sivas 2011).
- 4 According to *boxofficeturkiye.com*, the number of viewers who came to see a typical Nuri Bilge Ceylan film increased from a few thousand to 300,000 with his film *Three Monkeys* (2008).